

# Rhode Island

## Putting Together the Pieces of a Competency-Based System

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## About CompetencyWorks

CompetencyWorks is a collaborative initiative drawing on the knowledge of practitioners, its partners, and an advisory board. The International Association for K–12 Online Learning (iNACOL) is the lead organization, with project management facilitated by MetisNet.



For more information on competency education, you can visit [CompetencyWorks.org](http://CompetencyWorks.org), read previous issue briefs on the topic, or visit the [Competency-Based Pathways wiki](#) for an in-depth look at the working definition.

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## RHODE ISLAND

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*Cumberland High School*

Rhode Island was the first state to establish a proficiency-based diploma. The **initial policy** establishing a Diploma System, passed in 2003 by the Board of Education, set up proficiency-based graduation requirements in six content areas: math, English language arts, social studies, science, technology, and the arts. In addition, performance-based assessments were included as a graduation requirement to ensure students could apply their skills at higher levels as part of the state graduation requirements. The state now offers four types of performance assessments – comprehensive course assessments, exhibitions, graduation portfolios, or the Certificate of Mastery awarded by the RI Skills Commission – of which districts must select two for their graduation requirements.

#### THE DIPLOMA SYSTEM

Under the **Diploma System**, students earned a diploma based on meeting three sets of requirements: the successful completion of a minimum of twenty courses covering the six content areas and two performance-based assessments.

Students were required to demonstrate proficiency in the standards in each course, with districts determining the level of proficiency for graduation. A system of enhanced diplomas was introduced in 2011 with a Commissioner's Seal on their diploma for demonstration of bi-literacy.

Since the establishment of the Diploma System, the **Board of Education has added secondary school requirements** of practices they consider essential for creating an aligned system. These practices include:

- **Individualized learning plans** starting no later than sixth grade.
- **Multiple opportunities and measures** for students to demonstrate proficiency.
- **Appropriate supports** for students to meet objectives.

*Rhode Island aspires to provide an educational system in which every student is enrolled in rigorous learning environments that meet their individual needs and through which students progress based upon their demonstrated mastery of essential, aligned, and agreed-upon rigorous academic and 21st century skills. Starting in early childhood, students have access to personalized learning experiences that are experiential, blended, flexible, and differentiated; as a result of these experiences, students will be able to control the pace, place, and content of their learning experience while meeting state and local requirements.*

– 2020 VISION FOR EDUCATION: RHODE ISLAND'S STRATEGIC PLAN FOR PK-12 & ADULT EDUCATION 2015-2020.

- **A progress plan** that outlines the type and duration of academic support to be provided to students when they do not meet grade-level proficiency on the state assessments exams.
- **Literacy and numeracy interventions** for any student performing one or more levels below grade level.
- **Multiple pathways** for students to meet the high school graduation requirements, including career and technical programs, expanded learning opportunities, dual enrollment, and online learning.
- **Structures to offer personalized learning** built into each middle and high school, with middle school also offering student advisories.

Rhode Island has several initiatives to support implementation, some driven by districts and others based on state-district partnerships. For example, eighteen schools participating in the League of Innovative Schools are learning more about how to create a proficiency-based system, with some moving toward proficiency-based grading. RIDE has launched the **Scaling Up PBG Network** in partnership with the Center for Collaborative Education to establish a network of secondary schools to develop a set of common performance assessments and establish high-quality assessment practices. There are also substantial efforts underway to introduce personalized learning, blended learning strategies, and career pathways into the Rhode Island schools.

### WHAT IS A COURSE?



In order to eliminate any barriers caused by seat-time requirements, the 2011 Board of Education modified the definition of a course to be a connected series of lessons and learning experiences that:

1. Establish expectations defined by recognized standards,
2. Provide students with opportunities to learn and practice skills, and
3. Include assessments of student knowledge and skills adequate to determine proficiency at the level of academic rigor required by relevant content standards.



### NEXT STEPS

The Board of Education approved a new **strategic plan in 2015** based on an exemplary process of community engagement. The plan includes a vision for a RI graduate to be *well prepared for postsecondary education, work, and life. He or she can think critically and collaboratively and can act as a creative, self-motivated, culturally competent learner and citizen.* The values driving the vision are equity, support, diversity (culture and different bases of knowledge), autonomy, preparedness, personalization, and safety. Within the personalized learning priority, the first outcome is *to increase number of schools implementing a school-wide proficiency-based model for instruction and advancement.*

### PRIORITIES

The six priority areas focus and organize Rhode Island's strategic plan for public education over the next five years.



- 1 **Teacher and Leader Support**
- 2 **Early Childhood Education**
- 3 **Personalized Learning Statewide**
- 4 **Globally Competent Graduates**
- 5 **Informed Instructional Decision Making**
- 6 **Student-Centered Resource Investment**

The Board of Education continues to refine the Diploma System with new regulations expected to be issued in the fall of 2016. In the proposed regulations, graduation requirements will be: 1) demonstrating proficiency in twenty courses and 2) completion of one performance-based diploma assessment that includes both applied learning skills and core content proficiency. Students are required to present their portfolio or exhibition to a review panel that will use a state-approved rubric.

### **WILL STATE POLICY LEAD TO TRANSFORMATION?**

The challenge before Rhode Island is for districts to use the set of practices required by the state as the building blocks for creating proficiency-based systems. At this time, although many districts will describe themselves as having proficiency-based diplomas, few have been identified as embracing the values or responsiveness that would be expected in a proficiency-based system. Providence has started down the path toward proficiency-based learning by creating new high schools as part of the **Opportunity by Design** initiative launched by the Carnegie Corporation and **Springpoint**. However, for a proficiency-based system to fully develop, it will require districts to engage in a much fuller transformation process.

## **A LOOK AT EARLY ADOPTERS IN RHODE ISLAND**

### **CUMBERLAND HIGH SCHOOL**

Cumberland High School had many of the pieces of a competency-based system in place, including personalized learning plans and performance assessments. However, it wasn't until they introduced standards-based grading that they generated the level of transparency needed to create consistency across the school and autonomy for teachers.

CHS has created a hybrid proficiency-based grading system that is based on student performance levels while still converting into a numerical grade. The performance level rubric is designed to create consistent scoring across all staff members, relying on moderate, strong, and distinguished command of the standard. Students receive feedback on how they can improve their performance. CHS has also eliminated zeros and the D and F. A **video on their grading policy** describes how the rubric scores are then turned into the numerical scores used to determine A, B, or C.

CHS academic expectations are organized around measurement standards. Students are assessed against them. There are about four to six measurement standards for each year, and teachers use common scoring guides. An example of a measurement standard might be demonstrating the use of *evidence-based* claims in a social studies course. Within the academic departments, teachers have worked to create learning progressions around sub-standards – what are the things students need to know and be able to do in order to meet the measurement standard?

Cumberland has developed performance-based assessments aligned with the measurement standards. Students are expected to do two to three within each marking period. The school has also created a validation process to ensure that the performance-based assessments maintain a high level of rigor. A learning

information system (LIS) tracks every measurement standard and every performance-based assessment. This allows for transparency and, with it, greater consistency and accountability on how teachers are assessing student work.

Cumberland High School uses Learner Qualities (LQ) that are considered foundational to academic achievement: attitude and mindset, quality producer, respectful citizen, self-directed learner, and collaborative work. The LQs are only assessed formatively, with students given the chance to demonstrate them in all of their courses. The student information system is organized so that students can see how they are doing on academic progress as well as the LQs. Students are scored as met or not met on LQs, and you can't be on the honor roll without having met all of them.



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The school district has recently begun a process to support eighth and ninth grade teachers to talk together about what students are expected to do when they enter high school. They've created a common assessment for the end of eighth grade to help middle school teachers and students strive to meet that level of proficiency. The common assessment also provides ninth grade teachers with an understanding of exactly where each student needs to continue their learning as they make the transition into high school.

*Adapted from CompetencyWorks case study on **Cumberland High School**.*

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